

ROUTINE NIGHT AT THE OFFICE OVER THE BLACK SEA

by

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One of the Operation Locations that the 55th Strat Recon Wing had in operation back in the sixties, was located at Incirlik Air Base situated right outside of Adana Turkey. This garden spot with exotic animals, mostly camels, and insects of various species, including poisonous scorpions, was the home of normally three to five aircrews, plus supporting Operational, Maintenance and other troops. A tour for the aircrews was three to four months, whereas the supporting troops, including myself was programmed for six months. On occasion, to ease the boredom, these troops would head for Ankara, or even Lebanon. The latter location provided them the opportunity to purchase gold trinkets for their wives or girl friends, perhaps both.

And thus it was that I was assigned as the Detachment Commander in the latter part of 1959 and the early part of 1960 My duties ranged from insuring that the crews had at their disposal all that was required to fly their assigned missions, and also to be sure that when not flying, that their personal needs were met. I acted also as the go between the Wing and the Crews when that was not the case.

I fast learned that when boredom sets in, that Crew Members truly enjoyed playing pranks on those around them, including yours truly. Remember the camels? Well one morning I awoke, and six inches from my face was this camel face hovering over me. I yelled, he made a rather loud noise, jumped back and proceeded to wee wee all over the floor. I still can't figure out how they got that darn camel into my room without waking me. A similar occurrence took place shortly thereafter in Warren Aylsworth's room, only this time the camel did more than wee wee. Short sheeting beds was also quite popular. The one time it happened to me, it scared the wits out of me, as when I finally squared the sheets away and was ready to jump into bed, there lay a six inch or so centipede. Dead of course, but not so much to notice that at first glance. Looking back, I guess harmless fun like that was far better than some of the more serious problems that could have occurred.

In early February 1960, SAC Headquarters planned a mission unlike any that I had ever seen flown by the 55th Crews. Most, if not all, of our missions were flown single ship, at 35,000 feet or so, as we paralleled a given coastline, and, as far as I can recall other than Operation Home Run, that was the general rule. Not so for this one. SAC was interested in knowing the capabilities of Russian radar as it pertained to "painting" low level penetrating aircraft, and this mission was

planned, hopefully, to determine that capability.

To accomplish this tasking, two crews were scheduled to fly, with one of the aircraft being an RB-47 ERB aircraft, rather than the standard RB 47-H models which most of the 55th crews flew. This aircraft had electronic collection equipment deemed far more capable to do the job versus the H Model RB-47. The crew makeup was also different, as it only required two EWO [Electronic Warfare Officers] crew members instead of the normal three. The crews selected were those having Pat Woolbright in what we believe to be in an H model and Don Grant in the ERB Aircraft as Aircraft Commanders.

Grant's crew was to take off, heading Northeast, climb to 20,000 feet, heading for the Southern coast of Russia, and immediately after departing the Turkish land mass, descend to 300 feet prior to reaching a point twenty miles off the coastline, at which time they would then turn on a northwest heading, maintain 420 knots indicated airspeed, flying parallel to the coast, until reaching a point close to the mouth of the entrance to the Sea of Azov, turn left, following the Crimean coastline, still at 300 feet, flying to a point right south of Yalta, then turning south rapidly popping up to 20,000 feet, returning back to Incirlik.

As to Woolbright's mission we have had difficulty in determining the specifics of the route he flew, therefore this data is based on comments exchanged between Woolbright and others after the mission. Attempts were made to locate any of his crew members or others who might have knowledge of the mission, but this was unsuccessful. We do know that he flew at 300 to 400 feet altitudes in the Sevastopol area but as stated we cannot be precise as to where. We are also aware that at some point he climbed to 22,000 and after popping up that Soviet radar activity was intense and fighters were scrambled to intercept him. Fortunately, they were unsuccessful in locating him.

One of the prerequisites of the mission was that it was to be scheduled ONLY if less than good weather would be prevalent along the collection portion of the route. Three hundred feet ceiling with a one mile visibility being the criteria. SAC Weather Center back at Omaha would call the shot of when to go. The key here was that NO instructions was provided IF the actual weather conditions did not match forecasted data.

Another bit of interest here as it pertains to the ability to know how high one is above the ground. Back in the early Sixties, the standard way to determine your correct altitude was with use of the Barometric Altimeter. One manually set the barometric pressure reading for the location you were in, and technically the altimeter gave you the correct altitude you were above the ground. This was to be provided by SAC Hdqrs and set into the Altimeter as the crews entered the area of interest. Keep this in mind when later reading as it relates to the actual flight conditions.

SAC Hdqrs alerted us that the mission was scheduled to go in a couple of days, and mission preparations began. Unfortunately, at the same time Don Grant became ill and went DNIF [duty not including flying.] Much conversations began between myself and the Wing. They wished to send over another Aircraft Commander to take Don's place, whereas I stated that I was a fully currently qualified Aircraft Commander capable of flying the mission, having had two TDY'S, [temporary duty], one to Thule and the other to Yakota. Finally, the Wing agreed with me and I became the replacement for Grant.



As stated earlier, weather was to be a deciding factor in decision to go or not go, with inclement weather being required and SAC stated it was a go for the night of February 6 1960. Both crews were briefed and both aircraft took off on their assigned missions, however Woolbright had a slight delay from his scheduled take off time.

As we approached the descent point off the coast of Turkey, it became apparent that the SAC weather forecasters had really blown their forecast, as instead of low hanging clouds and poor visibility, it was clear as a bell. Remember, there

was no guidance as to what we should do in the advent that the weather was not as forecasted, I therefore decided to press on. Also remember the Barometric Altimeter setting procedure which was to be the main instrument in telling me that I was maintaining the required 300 feet altitude? Well, about three quarters of the way up the route, the Co-Pilot yells out there was a vessel dead ahead, and it looked as if we were going to hit it. I pulled up, and we went right over him. I surely do not think that there was a vessel that stuck up 300 feet in the air, meaning of course that we were much much lower than 300 feet. So much for forecasted data from a Hdqrs located halfway around the world. We flew the entire low level portion of the route being able to see shore lights, boats without incident.

We encountered absolutely no fighter problems, and after the mission, I asked the EWOs' if we had been "painted" by any Soviet radars and the answer was "no" while at 300 feet, but once we popped up south of Yalta, our sets really lit up as they really started painting us. However this was not the case with Woolbright. After the mission, Woolbright stated he had Russian radars on him for quite a while, which of course led to fighters being scrambled searching for him. He then said it was all my fault as I stirred them up and hustled out of there. This was in the early sixties and the Russians had not achieved the level of excellence that they now possess in radar detection and fighter intercept.

I flew as a replacement for Grant on four standard type missions without incident at which time Grant returned to flying status, and at the end of six months I packed up and returned to Forbes.

My thanks to Dick Poppert who was the Co-Pilot on this mission, for his assistance in helping to recall this bit of history that took place over 48 years ago.